

# BAY AREA

## AND CALIFORNIA

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Photos by MARK COSTANTINI / The Chronicle

Renee Morrison covers her mouth and nose near a Fifth Street yeast plant. "We're sick and tired of being dumped on," she says.

# RISING TENSIONS

*West Oakland  
neighbors angry over  
yeast plant emissions*

By Janine DeFao  
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

For nearly a century, West Oakland residents have sniffed a strong, slightly sweet smell in the air that many of them find irritating and even sickening.

Some thought it came from a brewery, while others knew the source was the yeast factory on Fifth Street, across the street from the West Oakland BART station.

*"It is undeniable the smell is impacting the lives of people in the community."*

JOHN RUSSO  
city attorney

ing chemical all these years," said activist Renee Morrison, who grew up in the neighborhood and still lives there. "In order for us to be able to breathe clean air, the (yeast factory) has got to go. ... We're sick and tired of being dumped on."

Longtime West Oaklanders like Morrison have become emboldened as they've success-

What they didn't know until recently is that those emissions also could cause cancer. Now, some residents are vowing to shut the factory down. And Oakland's city attorney is considering suing the plant to cut its foul discharge, though company officials say it is harmless.

"I remember smelling this stuff as a little kid and not knowing I've been breathing a cancer-caus-

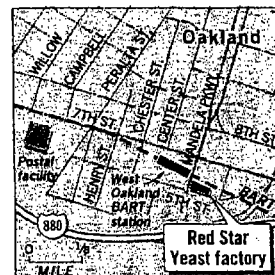


Monsa Nitoto worries that the yeast plant odor will threaten plans for a transit village.

fully taken on pollution from truck traffic at the nearby Port of Oakland and the incineration of contaminated soil near the Cypress Freeway. They have been joined by new residents drawn to West Oakland for its relatively cheap real estate and proximity to San Francisco, despite the fact that it remains one of Oakland's most industrial areas.

But officials with LeSaffre Yeast Corp., which bought the plant and its Red Star Yeast brand last year, say their 100-year history gives them as much right as the residents to stay in the neighborhood.

Their emissions are well below legal limits and not harmful, said plant manager Michael J. Cunningham, contentions backed by government regulators. In addition, the company



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Chronicle Graphic

# West Oakland factory emissions

## ► YEAST

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has reduced its emissions 60 percent from last year and believes they will drop further, he said.

"This is insane. . . . If we were to disappear tomorrow, it would be undetected" in the neighborhood's air quality, said Cunningham, pointing out the clogged freeway just outside his office window.

Cunningham believes what is really behind the growing opposition to the plant is a vacant lot across the street — the planned site of a "transit village" of housing and shops next to BART.

Leaders of efforts against Red Star, as the plant is still known, admit that is a factor.

"Who wants to live next to a yeast plant? People are going to want to leave when they get a whiff of this stuff," said Monsa Nitoto of the Coalition for West Oakland Revitalization. The group is working on a transit village plan in which neighborhood residents could own shares of the development in an effort to protect against gentrification of the area.

For 100 years, the plant has been producing yeast through a process in which living yeast cells are scraped from a single "mother culture" frozen in liquid nitrogen. The cells are then multiplied in five fermentation tanks, fed by ingredients including molasses.

The yeast is sold to industrial bakeries such as Safeway either in a liquid form resembling chocolate milk, pumped into tanker trucks, or in claylike blocks. The 46-employee plant produces 32 million pounds of yeast each year, enough to bake 512 million loaves of bread.

LeSaffre, based in France, is the world's largest yeast producer. Fleischmann's Yeast, a competitor, closed its Oakland plant this spring, leaving the West Oakland yeast factory the only one in the Bay Area.

Among the byproducts of yeast production is acetaldehyde — a probable human carcinogen, according to the state and federal

governments — and the frequent odor residents blame for a range of problems from asthma attacks to nausea.

Last year, the company reported emitting 22,000 pounds of acetaldehyde, but it expects this year's numbers to drop to 8,800 pounds because of new, more efficient procedures put in place, Cunningham said.

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District, which oversees LeSaffre's operating permit, has concluded that the cancer risk from the plant is less than 8 in 1 million, and that acetaldehyde emissions are not high enough to cause other negative health impacts.

But residents find that hard to believe.

"The smell makes me very sick to my stomach. My nose burns, my chest gets tight, and I have a dry, bad cough," said Monica Marshall, 37, a lifelong West Oaklander and asthma sufferer who lives one block from the plant.

A recent study by Oakland's Pacific Institute showed West Oakland children were seven times more likely to be hospitalized with asthma than their peers statewide. And a small state Health Department study found a higher than expected incidence of cancer in the area.

City Councilwoman Nancy Nadel, who represents the neighborhood, said risks from the yeast plant should not be downplayed even though it creates only a small part of West Oakland's air pollution.

"It is a public health risk because it adds to all the other public health risks in the area," Nadel said. "We need to hammer away at all of them."

Nadel and yeast factory opponents are pressuring the air district to deny LeSaffre's operating permit, which it is in the process of renewing. But air district officials say they have no basis to shut down the plant because it has not violated its permit for emissions or odors.

Residents and city officials contend that is because the air district's odor complaint process is

cumbersome, ineffective and biased toward industry.

In order for an public nuisance odor violation to be issued, district inspectors have to verify five separate odor complaints, in person, within 24 hours. But with factors including changing winds and the time it takes inspectors to arrive, the air district has yet to confirm enough complaints in a single day to issue a violation.

Peter Hess, deputy air pollution control officer for the district, said the agency was using a different, easier standard to rein in LeSaffre's odors. That regulation was triggered by 10 unconfirmed complaints within a 90-day period. Now, an odor violation can be issued if a test panel of people can detect an odor in samples collected periodically from the plant.

"We're using all the tools we have," Hess said.

One test has been completed, and the company passed. But the process has left residents and city officials frustrated.

"I can't believe so many people can perceive a problem and yet the people who are tasked by state law with protecting the rights of residents and protecting people's health don't see the same problem," said City Attorney John Russo. "It is undeniable the smell is impacting the lives of people in the community."

Russo's staff is researching whether it can bring a public nuisance lawsuit against LeSaffre or a suit against the air district forcing it to better regulate the factory.

Meanwhile, LeSaffre officials say they believe their new processes will continue to cut emissions, and they are working to reduce the odor as well. They also hope to better communicate with the community, something the company admittedly has failed to do in the past.

"There's a lot of misinformation out there," said Cunningham, the plant manager. "They've been told: 'If you smell it, you're going to die.' It's going to take a lot to convince them otherwise."